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Neoliberalism, emotional experience in education and Adam Smith: reading *The theory of moral sentiments* alongside *The wealth of nations*

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This paper examines some critical accounts of emotional life shaped by neoliberalism. A range of literature concerned with neoliberalism and emotional experience in educational contexts is reviewed. I argue that neoliberal ‘reforms’ in public institutions create an ever-increasing demand for emotional performance. Neoliberals often refer to Adam Smith’s *The wealth of nations* (*WN*) but this paper focuses on Smith’s equally significant *The theory of moral sentiments*. In this work Smith connects competitive social relationships with varieties of challenging emotional experience. I argue that theorists in the present, seeking to understand neoliberal ‘reforms’ in public institutions, should focus on not just *WN* but both of Smith’s major works together. This paper offers new insights into the nature of neoliberalism, extending and developing the field of historically informed critical work highlighted in this paper.

Keywords: neoliberalism; emotion; education; Adam Smith; *The wealth of nations*; *The theory of moral sentiments*

Introduction

Neoliberalism is a multifarious concept applied in many contexts. Neoliberalism is commonly used to refer to an economic process of market deregulation with concomitant ‘reform’ of public institutions to favour market-driven competition (Hall 2011). Within the context of education, perceived crises in the public sector have been met with neoliberal ‘solutions’, requiring more competition and more entrepreneurialism (Slater 2015). Institutions being affected by neoliberal economic change reveal increasingly polarised varieties of emotional experience. On the one hand, individuals are positioned as emotionally fragile and in need of therapeutic ‘interventions’, through which they are supposed to

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establish positive identifications with the changes as they occur (Parker 2007). On the other hand, individuals are expected to engage entrepreneurially with those changes (Olssen 1996), and to use their emotional resources to gain competitive advantage. Individuals are therefore caught up in narratives of emotional vulnerability that are, in a sense, subsequently denied by expectations of emotional power and resilience.

Critics working with neoliberalism are theorising the impact of neoliberal change in increasingly sophisticated ways. Theorising neoliberalism retains a significant challenge however, since neoliberalism is a ‘parasite’ doctrine, forever reconceptualising itself to take advantage of different cultural opportunities (Blackmore 2011, Staunaes 2011, Peck 2013). Neoliberalism is therefore hard to ‘pin down’ in a particular place (Cooper 2001, Ball 2012, Gunter 2012). A growing body of work, intersecting with but not restricted to educational concerns, is paying more attention to the *historical* origins of neoliberal capitalism. Scholars working in this field are tracing the economic, moral and philosophical beliefs upon which neoliberalism is historically based (Macintyre 1988, Gerhardt 2010, Graeber 2011, Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2013). In particular, scholars are interested in the historical moment within which modern economic theory may have originated. A key figure for these scholars therefore is Adam Smith, also the focus of the present study. This study situates itself within an important and expanding field of inquiry, in which particular attention is paid to the ways in which historical ideas are used to justify current social and economic practices.

Adam Smith’s economic ideas have been highly influential within neoliberal thought and practice. Moreover a particular view of Smith has become popularised, in which Smith’s economic policies set in train an economic transformation culminating in neoliberal capitalism. References to Adam Smith have become particularly evident in recent years when debates have focused on the financial indiscipline of nation states, and the ‘corrective’ mechanism of privatisation and market competition (Slater 2015). In *City Journal* in 2012, liberal economist Guy Sorman wrote:

Global growth, thus, is not a miracle, but the outcome of sound economic policies. This confirms what free-market economists have been writing since 1776, when Adam Smith published his *Wealth of Nations*: economic policies based on entrepreneurship, open borders, and competition, prove successful. Socialism, promoted throughout the twentieth century as a way to bridge the gap between poor and rich countries, has failed everywhere. The debate is over, or should be.

The wealth of nations (*WN*) extols the virtues of market competition, a doctrine that according to Sorman has no credible modern alternative. Perhaps modern economists overlook the wider context of *WN*, provided by *The theory of moral sentiments* (*TMS*). In *TMS* Smith focuses on emotional identities shaped by early capitalism, highlighting the emotional insecurity attendant upon social competition. My key argument is that *TMS* should be read alongside *WN*, by

current scholars seeking to understand the emotional impact of neoliberal reform. Moreover both *WN* and *TMS* were based on a series of lectures Smith gave in the 1750s and 1760s, suggesting they had a common origin in Smith's thought and ought to be read together¹ (Smith 2009, intro p. viii).

The ideas of Adam Smith: introduction

In this section, some of the key ideas of Adam Smith are introduced and developed. It is suggested that taken together Smith's accounts of economic exchange and emotional life under early capitalism provide a basis for understanding neoliberal theory and practice. Initially, a particular version of Smith's work is presented, reflecting the ideological priorities of right-wing economist Milton Friedman. Then there is discussion of the emotional impact of social competitiveness, highlighted in Smith's *TMS* in tandem with extended examples from the current educational literature.

Milton Friedman on Adam Smith

Milton Friedman is closely identified with the 'Chicago School' of free-market economics, whose thinking has been highly influential in the wake of recent crises in public funding and consequent privatisations (Klein 2008). Friedman's ideas are set out in *Capitalism and freedom*, in which he gives an economic analysis of the problem of maintaining freedom in a co-ordinated society. One key passage runs:

Fundamentally, there are only two ways of co-ordinating the economic activities of millions. One is central direction involving the use of coercion . . . the other is voluntary co-operation of individuals – the technique of the market place . . . Exchange can therefore bring about co-ordination without coercion. A working model of a society organized through voluntary exchange is a *free private enterprise exchange economy* – what we have been calling competitive capitalism. (Friedman 1982, pp. 12–13; emphasis in original)

Friedman's thesis is that free-market competition represents the best way for all the individuals in a society to harmonise their various preferences. This is because successful economic exchange creates positive relationships between the parties involved in the transaction. The customer is therefore less likely to be exploited, and the entrepreneur unlikely to try to exploit them:

Now let me emphasise, competition does not protect the consumer because business men are more soft hearted than bureaucrats, or because they are more altruistic, or because they are more generous . . . but only because it is the self-interest of the entrepreneur to protect the consumer. (Friedman 2012)

To summarise the main points: because society is economically interdependent, the best guarantor of mutual esteem and protection is self-interest. This prompts

us to treat our co-dependents well, not because we empathise with their situation or can relate to them as individuals, but because we wish to continue exchanging with them on mutually beneficial terms. Friedman illustrates his case with reference to a famous passage from *WN* (1776):

Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want . . . It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity, but to their self-love, and never talk to them of their own necessities, but of their advantages. (Smith 1952, pp. 56–57)

This passage is significant for its influence upon Friedman and other modern economists, and within the discipline of economics as a whole (Graeber 2011). The economic transactions depicted in this passage are not situated in a particular historical moment, but it is important to note that Smith does provide historical proof for his economic theory. In *WN* he traces economic exchange chronologically back to ‘primitive’ economies where he supposes exchange took place through the medium of barter (p. 57). Despite the fact these historical speculations are central to Smith’s theory, they are not borne out by the historical evidence (Humphrey 1985). The significance of this criticism can only be alluded to within the scope of this study. Perhaps most significantly, the historical implausibility of Smith’s evidence calls into question the idea that human beings are driven by self-interest. This point requires some development.

Orthodox economic theory works from the assumption that individuals know what they want, and are seeking to gain competitive advantage through economic transaction. It is assumed they are not influenced by things that might change the nature of the transaction, such as friendship, or trust, or not really knowing what they want (Graeber 2011). However, experience suggests that transactions *are* affected in this way, because economic self-interest is embedded in other kinds of relationship. Our relationships involve complex forms of reciprocity that can make it hard to identify where ‘self-interest’ could lie. Moreover competitive relationships create emotional insecurity, widely reported by critics of neoliberal reform (Craig and Fieschi 2007, Fielding 2007) perhaps overlooked by neoliberal economists. However, in *TMS* (1759/2009) Smith wrote about the emotional impact of social competition at considerable length. These ideas provide critical context for the economic doctrine presented in *WN* and are highlighted in the next section.

TMS and education

In this section, key ideas from *TMS* are presented in tandem with accounts of emotional experience under neoliberalism, particularly in educational literature. It is suggested that the orthodoxies of neoliberal economic theory become harder to sustain, as social competition works to obscure fundamental categories like ‘self’ and ‘self-interest’. As a consequence, the neoliberal

demand for emotional ‘performance’ looks increasingly unrealistic. The discussion highlights alternative, socially engaged conceptions of ‘self’ that contrast with utilitarian priorities of performance. Personal narratives of emotional experience are included to develop the analysis of ‘cost’ associated with neoliberal reform.

In *TMS* Smith highlights the emotional impact of early capitalism. As in *WN*, Smith has in mind universal human traits but his examples are extrapolated from his historical moment, in eighteenth-century Scotland. At this juncture in Scotland’s historical, a long-standing commitment to republican virtues was being abandoned in favour of economic utility and disutility, wrapped in the language of taste and civility (Oz-Salzberger 2003, Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2013). Adam Smith adapted his moral philosophy to the new commercial conditions, valuing the ‘spirit of independence and sense of ego of the commercial man rather than the libertarian civic virtues of the classical republican’ (Phillipson 1983, p. 179).

Smith’s text depicts a world of highly competitive economic and social relationships. In these circumstances, the individual seeks to keep up appearances at all costs. Smith’s examples highlight self-interest working as a reflexive process, in which emotional reactions are constantly adjusted to portray the proper ‘taste’ and generate social advantage. Smith gives the example of a vexed man being teased by his companions:

Men of the most ordinary good breeding dissemble the pain which any little incident may give them; and those who are more thoroughly formed to society, turn, of their own accord, all such incidents into raillery, as they know their companions will do for them. The habit which a man, who lives in the world, has acquired of considering how every thing that concerns him will appear to others, makes those frivolous calamities turn up in the same ridiculous light to him, in which he knows they will certainly be considered by them. (2009, p. 53)

TMS contains many such passages, in which emotional response is neither authentic nor inauthentic, but calculated to pre-empt the judgements of social competitors. Emotional experience therefore does not represent a particular focal point for personal identity, but a shifting demand to be met across multiple perspectives. This picture of emotional calculation reverberates strongly with accounts of emotional experience under neoliberalism. In recent decades critics have focused on increasing demands within professional roles for emotional performance (Hochschild 1979, 1983). Similarly educational leaders who can demonstrate high levels of emotional ‘skill’ can be seen as more professional. Held and McKimm note:

Leaders in emotionally charged contexts of education and related fields, who can draw on deep acting or spontaneous and genuine emotion, may well be considered more effective and gain the respect of followers. (2012, p. 60)

These experiences match and extend those depicted by Adam Smith in *TMS*, above. As with the ‘man of good breeding’ in Smith’s example, educational professionals deploy emotions strategically, to anticipate shifting social demands. Emotional identity appears not so much as a locus for authentic personal responses, but as an interpersonal mechanism for feeling what others feel and presenting the appropriate response. Held and McKimm highlight that in this context ‘genuine’ emotion is another type of emotional resource, deployed to create the necessary effects (Hanley 2013). Just as Smith’s ‘man of good breeding’ conceals emotional difficulties from his peers, the emotionally skilled educational leader presents emotional responses in ‘positive’ language. This can create difficulty for educational leaders whose emotional responses may be ambivalent and troubling. Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski note the limited means available to school leaders for exploring the complex emotional demands of their professional roles: ‘we find no simple language or vocabulary in the workplace to speak of the feelings of leadership isolation, fear, vulnerability and loss’ (2004, p. 312). Moreover school leaders, like the ‘man of good breeding’, are conscious of having to match emotional responses to the demands of multiple others associated with the institution, and at some level engage with them all (2004, p. 314).

The passage from *TMS* above, referring to ‘men of good breeding’ and ‘society’, highlights the class-bound nature of social competition. Fear of poverty and adulation of riches run through the pages of *TMS* (e.g. see Smith 1759/2009, pp. 63, 65). Moreover there is a morbid fear of impropriety, particularly in relation to social rank (p. 71). Smith uses the image of a ‘looking glass’ to illustrate how the individual anxiously cross-examines herself, as if staring in a mirror. If on reflection she decides some error of taste or feeling has been detected by others, she is doubly distressed until some way can be found to rescue the situation:

... if we are doubtful about it, we are often, upon that very account, more anxious to gain their approbation, and, provided we have not already, as they say, shaken hands with infamy, we are altogether distracted by the thoughts of their censure ... (1759/2009, p. 135)

This complex passage requires some unpicking. It was suggested above that an individual’s ‘self-interest’ may not be a significant influence upon her economic behaviour. Moreover notions of ‘self’ can be hard to distinguish from more fluid and permeable subjectivities, as in this passage where the individual restlessly adjusts to the inferred expectations of others who we can assume are anxiously adjusting themselves to her. The ‘true’ self seems to be held in suspense between perceptions (Baillie 2000, p. 39), and simplistic notions of ‘self’ and ‘self-interest’ recede into the background.

This passage reverberates strongly with contemporary critical work on personal identity. According to Nikolas Rose, the self should be understood not as something fixed, but as a shifting and problematic entity that is reproduced

through practices of self-discipline and self-scrutiny. Following Foucault, Rose refers to the ‘techniques of the self’ through which we adjust to various governmental mechanisms. These require ‘self-reformation, therapy, techniques of body alteration, and the calculated reshaping of speech and emotion’ (1999, p. 11). Prominent contemporary theorists emphasise the impossibility of living up to the mandate to ‘be oneself’ (Zizek 2006). The best one can achieve is convincing performance (Butler 2011) but there is no ‘original self’ sitting behind the various representations. Such postmodernist and post-structuralist accounts do not sit comfortably with socially engaged depictions of ‘self’. For example, Dewey argues education should prepare the individual for social *service* as well as economic participation (1967, p. 22). Moreover, Sullivan (2000) asserts that educational experience should be guided by a sense of the ‘vocational’, maintaining a person-centred perspective above priorities of performance. More recently, critics such as Higgins (2010a) have focused upon the emotional disorientation experienced by educators working with neoliberal reform: ‘Enter stage left, the selfless saints . . . enter stage right, the selfish scoundrels’ (p. 189). Higgins proposes an alternative ethic of self-cultivation, in which professional experience is aligned with narratives of personal flourishing (2010b, p. 239).

It is interesting to note that intense self-scrutiny (in the excerpt from Smith immediately above) is commonly associated with twentieth-century narcissism (Lasch 1979), and has deeper-rooted origins in early capitalism. Similarly, Smith’s passage suggests that from its inception, capitalism appeared to be operating on an ideological level, *producing* the economic identities it was also claiming objectively to *represent* in treatises like *WN*. These ideas have wider implications for further study, beyond the scope of this article. However, some additional points can be made in relation to current educational experience.

In her review of educational leadership literature, Dorthe Staunaes illustrates the increasing sophistication with which the management of emotion is being conceptualised. The emotional identity of the individual is presented as the ultimate measure of her resource ‘value’, in relation to which effective deployment of human resource equates with ‘successful management of the heart’:

successful management of the heart becomes a matter of investment and growth. It can be measured by how far the limits of a single individual can be stretched and to what degree the potentials of organisation and subjectivities can be maximized. (2011, p. 240)

In public institutions undergoing neoliberal economic change, ‘emotion’ appears to be just another resource, marking the entrepreneurial ‘value’ of individual professionals. Passages from *TMS* perhaps give us occasion to look at this quotation slightly differently. Economic change brings about competitive social relationships necessitating further, personal and emotional changes. These personal and emotional changes do not sit in straightforward relations

of ‘efficiency’ with economic change. On the contrary, they illustrate the personal and emotional cost of competition, revealing how individuals react to change in ways that are often disturbing, dislocating and deeply troubling. One teacher writes of the daily demand for professional ‘performance’ and its cumulative emotional impact:

the need for things to go well is almost overwhelming, when they do the highs are mountainous, when they don’t the lows are deep canyons; the highs are fleeting but the lows are long lasting . . . I would spend weekends and evenings preparing work in extreme detail so that it would limit the possibility for failure. I would lie in bed thinking about the areas of a lesson that could fail and skirt over the areas of success. The alarm clock became redundant; you don’t need to be told to get up. (*The Guardian* 2012)

This picture reverberates with the demand for emotional positivity seen throughout educational leadership literature (Staunæs 2011), whereby the true emotional cost of change is carried by the individual and borne out in personal difficulties like those highlighted above. A similar picture extends across higher education, so that student teachers are met by performance demands that stymie more productive engagement with subject knowledge and wider notions of professional development. One student teacher reflected upon his experience:

My first experience of teaching wasn’t just [me] and the students. There is a huge jumble of factors that come together to make up the work – it’s government policy influences, it’s your local authority, influences from your headteacher and your head of department and suddenly there’s lots of paper coming in – ‘this is what you have to do’ – ‘this is how much progress you have to make’. (McIntyre and Jones 2014, p. 35)

Smith *et al.* (2013) note that within current models of school-based teacher education, there is little time available for meaningful reflection upon education itself and its wider commitments to society. The personal aspirations of individual students are very quickly swamped by performative demands. Moreover academic subjects are subordinated to ‘administrative constraints prevailing in the particular context’ (Smith *et al.* 2013, p. 379); subject teaching can be overtaken by assessment and other organisational priorities as in the example above. A further personal account by a senior academic reveals the pervasiveness of emotional pressure arising from competitive social relationships, particularly where management practices emphasise hierarchy and division. One professor preparing for the Research Assessment Exercise noted the response of his line manager, when he declined extra work due to feeling stressed. ‘He shouted at me, “You’re supposed to be stressed! Professors here are supposed to be stressed! That’s the job”’ (*The Guardian* 2014). Once again, emotional stress is depicted as inherent to the professional role and the burden of positive response placed upon the individual.

Reflecting on emotional difficulties caused by competitive social relationships, in *TMS* Smith invites the reader to reflect on the wider context of economic changes. In the cases highlighted above, notions of self-interest are complicated by personal and emotional commitments one might argue far exceed reasonable levels of demand in a professional role. Furthermore, Smith invites us to resist the simple economic calculus embodied in *WN*, by understanding that emotional pressure arises alongside economic cost and that a more sophisticated analysis of their interconnections is required to challenge neoliberal reform in education. Some of these ideas are further developed below.

Further discussion

The discussion now develops some further arguments in relation to emotional experience and neoliberal changes, reflecting the ideas of Adam Smith. A complete analysis is not presented; rather continuities are presented for further critical work and analysis.

It was argued above, Smith did not view *WN* and *TMS* as separate works. They had a common origin in Smith's lectures of the 1750s and 1760s (Smith 1759/2009, intro. p. viii), which perhaps is surprising to the modern reader for whom economics and emotional experience are distinct and separate fields of inquiry. Nevertheless Smith's influence as an economist raises the question as to whether the texts ought to be taken together, especially by neoliberal theorists who may be aware of Smith's economic theory but not his analysis of its emotional impact.

In this study it is argued that scholars seeking to understand neoliberal changes should refer both to the popularly known *WN*, and to the equally significant *TMS*. Together the texts highlight a rationale for economic change and explore the emotional *effects* of those changes. In the context of this study, 'neoliberalism' begins to be identified not only with an economic ideology but with an order of emotional experience accruing from economic change. Disturbing though that change might be to individuals affected by neoliberal 'reform', an analysis informed by *TMS* might nevertheless focus on the demand for emotional 'performance' and positive language within neoliberal discourse, especially in educational contexts (Furedi 2009). Neoliberalism demands more than economic change; its many personal and emotional ramifications are highlighted by critics referenced in this study. Those wider demands are not yet adequately conceptualised within an economic doctrine, distanced from its emotional and personal effects. Therefore, a theoretical approach is required to capture the *dual* impact of neoliberal economic changes and emotional consequences. This paper highlights possibilities for new theoretical inquiry, juxtaposing economic ideals with personal narratives in which the impact of economic change comes into a sharper focus. This inquiry can

draw upon economic theory popularly ascribed to *WN*, alongside emotional and psychological impacts depicted in *TMS*.

Conclusion

This paper is intended to make a contribution to the critical study of neoliberalism. It has reviewed some of the critical work in the field of education for which neoliberalism represents a major concern. Within educational discourse, individuals are positioned *both* as emotionally vulnerable requiring positive responses *and* as emotionally resilient, responding with endless positivity to the emotional demands of their institutions.

Neoliberal changes are premised upon the economic views of Adam Smith in *WN*, extolling free competition and economic self-interest. However, Smith also highlighted the damaging emotional effects of social competition in *TMS*. The main argument in this paper is, despite *WN*'s popularity, scholars seeking to understand neoliberal change should also refer to *TMS*. This work explores some of the emotional difficulty referred to by critics of neoliberalism in educational contexts. Moreover, taken together the two texts challenge neoliberal theorists to account for the personal and emotional impact of neoliberal change, as well as its economic effects.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note

1. An account of Smith's Glasgow lectures was given by one of his students, John Millar. According to Millar, the second part of the lecture series was concerned with *ethics* and was afterwards published by Smith as *TMS*. The fourth part of the series was concerned with *expediency* and became *WN*. The lectures were grouped under the heading of Moral Philosophy. Probably, the lectures were delivered by Smith in approximately this form from 1752 to 1753 until January 1764 (Smith 1978, intro p. 3).

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